

Time-Space Relationships: The TF FSO and the Movement-to-Contact

by Major Boyd D. Gaines



necessary. Normally, the security force has initial priority of indirect fires....The security force must be far enough ahead of the advance guard (usually two to six kilometers) to provide adequate warning and sufficient space for them to maneuver....When the enemy force is discovered, the security force calls for and adjusts fires on the enemy....The security force avoids detection..."

The advance guard has similarly explicit tasks, "...the advance guard quickly moves to overpower and destroy platoon-sized and smaller security forces and combat outposts. The advance guard...fixes larger than platoon-sized enemy forces." The main body "remains one to two kilometers behind the advance guard element...it is flexible enough to maneuver rapidly to a decisive point on the battlefield to destroy the enemy."

Doctrine is also fairly specific with regard to fire support considerations to synchronize fires. See Figure 2 for those considerations as outlined in *FM 71-2* and *FM 6-20-40 Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Fire Support for Brigade Operations (Heavy)*.

Let's look at a threat formation that US forces could face on a movement-to-contact. Figure 3 shows a doctrinal portrayal

One of the most demanding missions a task force fire support officer (TF FSO) must plan for is undoubtedly a movement-to-contact against a moving threat formation. Limited reconnaissance, sketchy observation and communications plans and unfamiliar terrain all weigh heavily against success on the battlefield. They can easily become variables that could contribute to mission failure. This article reviews movement-to-contact doctrine and offers suggestions to help TF FSOs plan for success.

Doctrinal Review

The task force normally conducts a movement-to-contact as part of the brigade operation. *FM 71-2 The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force* states, "a TF conducts a movement-to-contact to make or regain contact with the enemy and to develop the situation." Doctrine is fairly specific about how a TF organizes to execute a movement-to-contact.

Figure 1 depicts a TF organized into a security force, an advance guard and a TF main body (as part of the brigade formation). Understanding this formation and the doctrinal missions given each element is critical to formulating an effective fire support plan. *FM 71-2* also states, "...the security force is normally established with the battalion scout platoon. Engineers and forward observers [FOs] are attached to the scout platoon and security force as

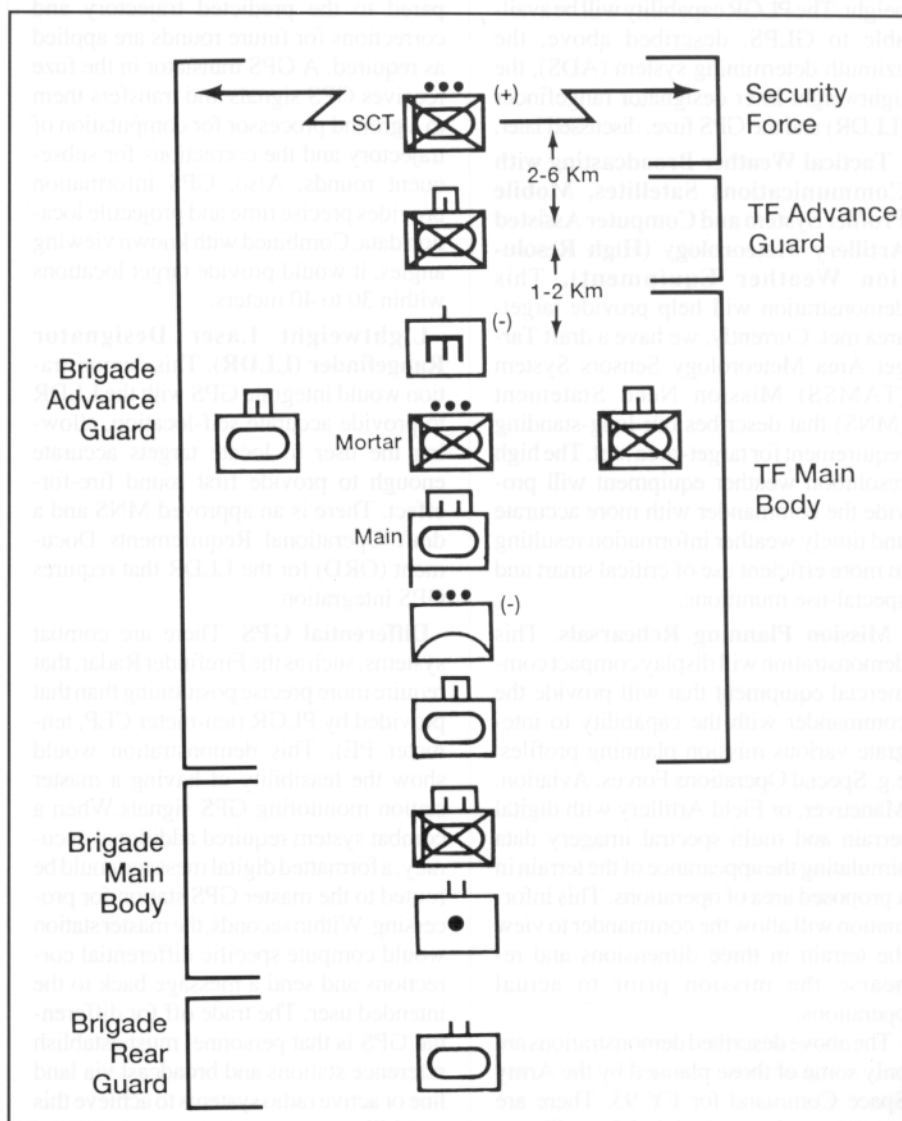


Figure 1: Battalion TF Movement-to-Contact as Part of a Brigade Attack. The TF consists of a security force, an advance guard and a main body.

- Ensure the priority task for fire support in the attack is the suppression of anti-armor systems that inhibit maneuver.
- Use smoke and illumination to facilitate TF maneuver.
- Allocate priority targets to weight the main attack.
- Provide responsive fires to the lead element by—
 - Assigning priority of fire.
 - Allocating priority targets to the company/team requiring responsiveness.
 - Positioning FOs or combat observation lasing teams (COLTs) effectively.
 - Making mortars more responsive upon contact.
 - Using a quick-fire or exclusive fire net to facilitate fire missions.
- Plan fires on the terrain to be traversed and on the flank to protect the force.
- Use smoke to obscure operations, screen friendly movement and breach obstacles.
- Be prepared for a hasty attack or defense, once contact is made.

Figure 2: Fire Support Considerations for Synchronization of Fires. As shown in this figure, FM 71-2 and FM 6-20-40 provide doctrinal fire support considerations for offensive operations.

engagement areas (EAs) will result from this wargaming process. The basic question is not where they want to kill the enemy, but *when* and *how* they want fire support to influence the battle when the TF makes contact.

Given this information, the FSO targets the most likely place the TF will make contact with the threat. This set of targets *becomes the generic sequence of engagements* for the TF, regardless of where it makes contact. In Figure 4, for example,

the target Group A1B is meant to be fired when the brigade makes *contact* with the forward security element.

The intent for fires is what's important. No matter where the TF meets the threat, it will engage the reconnaissance patrols, forward security element and advance guard's main body in the same generic sequence. It's impossible to target every proposed EA and contingency, given the normal limitations on targeting from brigade. Furthermore, if the FSO does target every EA, he ends up with the proverbial "measle sheet," which dilutes the clarity of the fire plan. You can provide the TF much more fire support flexibility by producing a fire plan that addresses the most likely course of action and conveying the intent to the company shooters.

Allocate priority targets. Priority targets do two things for the TF. First, priority targets along the axis of advance keep the artillery and mortars within range. Second, when contact is made, fires will be more responsive.

During the planning phase, the direct support (DS) battalion S3 and mortar platoon leader can determine position area requirements for different phases of the battle. An important point to remember is a planned target for a movement-to-contact facing an advancing threat formation is unlikely to be where the enemy actually deploys. But, because the tubes are already oriented in this general area, shift times should be reduced and fire support assets will be in range at the appropriate time. Furthermore, the FSOs use of priority targets focuses the fire support effort as the brigade moves to contact.

of a threat motorized rifle battalion (MRB) organized into an advance guard formation as shown in *FM 100-2-1 The Soviet Army: Operations and Tactics* (May 1989). Let's assume this is the threat the TF is facing. (It could be any threat. The point is, any mechanized adversary follows some sort of doctrine and can be templated.)

In the case of the advance guard formation in Figure 3, the TF FSO should note the following peculiarities:

- Multiple reconnaissance patrols are composed of BMPs [Soviet amphibious infantry combat vehicles], BRDMs [Soviet scout vehicles] and tanks.
- Tanks, mortars, engineers and artillery support the forward security element.
- The force is employing the doctrinal distance between the various sub-elements. This is important as it allows the TF to predict when the different formations will appear on the battlefield.

Knowing what the threat looks like on the battlefield gives the TF FSO (and brigade) a starting point upon which to build his plan for fires.

The Basic Plan

Failure to plan is planning for failure.

Anonymous

So what are the key planning considerations a TF FSO must take into account? As always, the planning process starts with the receipt of a mission. In this case, the TF mission is to meet an advance guard formation somewhere in the TF zone and destroy it to facilitate the forward movement of the brigade. The following are techniques that expand on the fire support considerations listed in FM 71-2 and FM 6-20-40.

Ensure the fire plan facilitates responsive fires. Figure 4 (Page 30) shows a typical maneuver plan with a fire plan superimposed. The TF has an axis of advance with objectives for orientation. An important point to remember is the objectives are for orientation only. The TF mission is force-oriented (i.e., destroy the threat) versus terrain-oriented. This means the objective won't necessarily be targeted.

The FSO plans targets along the TF's main axis of advance. These targets probably will be no more than three to four kilometers apart. During the war-gaming process, the TF commander, operations officer (S3) and intelligence officer (S2) "fight" the battle, including determining how the TF will react to enemy contact and then counteracting the threat's reaction to contact. Likely or proposed

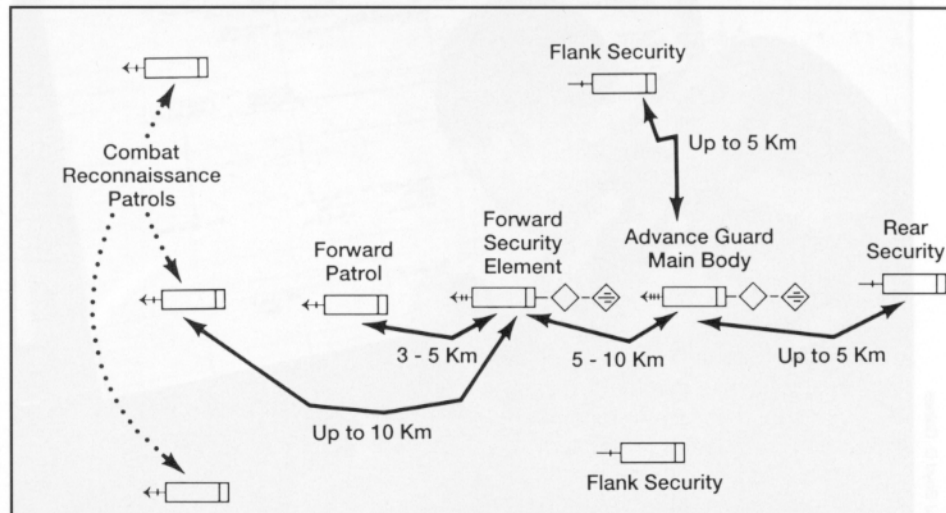


Figure 3: Doctrinal Template of a Motorized Rifle Battalion in a Typical Advance Guard Formation (FM 100-2-1)

Position FOs and COLTs effectively. Fire support (specifically mortars and artillery at the TF level) can influence the battle during a meeting engagement with an advance guard battalion during limited windows of opportunity. Normally, when the company-sized elements (forward security element and advance guard's main body) appear, they are lucrative targets. Unfortunately for the TFFSO, when these units come under direct fire, they tend to leave pre-battle formation and disperse. The fight then becomes danger-close with direct fire.

To counter this, the TFFSO must look at ways to get his assets forward into the fight. Reserve or follow-on company/teams can be stripped of their fire support team vehicles (FIST-Vs) while leaving the company FSO with the company commander or executive officer (making sure the company FSO has access to a radio that works). This technique provides extra assets to use on the battlefield. (This technique is addressed in *FM 6-30 Observed Fire Procedures*, page 2-3.)

COLTs are also ideal for this mission. A COLT could be given the mission of backing up the advance guard or company or of augmenting the scouts. The FSO should remember the COLT needs to be linked up with the appropriate company as soon as possible, allowing it to be

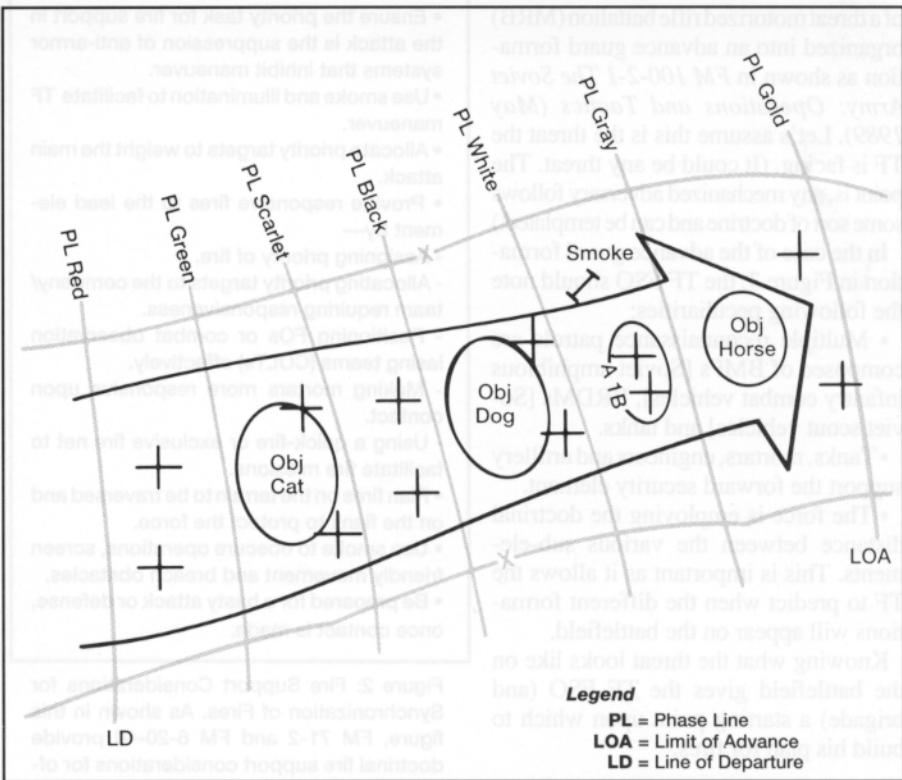


Figure 4: Simplified TF Graphics with Fire Plan Overlay

integrated into the troop-leading procedures for that company/team. The drop-dead time for linkup is usually the TF operations order time. This requires

the brigade to be very proactive in assigning a mission, briefing and linking COLTs up early with their respective TFs.

The argument can be made that “backup observers” (trained personnel within the company/team who are not fire support specialists) can handle the fire support tasks if the company FSO goes down. This is a home-station training issue that needs to be practiced before the TF FSO can rely on this technique. For example, the backup observer for a particular target could be one of the maneuver platoon leaders. The inherent danger with this option is that during execution, the platoon leader might be fighting his tank or commanding his platoon and may forget or disregard his fire support responsibilities.

Whatever the method, the result should be a TF FSO with redundant sets of eyes forward to exploit *windows of opportunity* in accordance with the commander’s intent for fires.

Provide responsive fires to the lead element. Why do we provide responsive fires to the lead element other than to destroy the enemy? In the case of the advance guard commander for the lead TF, we do it to provide him one extra element of combat power that helps ensure success on the battlefield and minimize friendly casualties. This is why,



Wargaming the course of action is a critical task for the TF FSO.



Opposing Force (OPFOR) BMP at the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC), Hohenfels, Germany.

doctrinally, the mortar platoon is placed under the operational control of (OPCON) the advance guard.

Mortars can provide that decisive edge that allows the advance guard commander to accomplish his doctrinal mission of destroying reconnaissance patrols and fixing company-sized elements. Suppression of enemy armored vehicles is definitely a combat multiplier that could give an M1A1 tank crewman the opportunity to destroy his opponent without taking return fire.

When the mortar platoon is OPCON to the advance guard, it literally belongs to that company/team. The fire direction centers (FDCs) drop off the TF fire support net, and the platoon leader operates on the company/team command net.

Because mortars are the only fire support asset the TF owns (and the only one the TF can always count on), the TF FSO should ensure there's a follow-on mission for the mortar platoon. At some point, the advance guard will cease to be the main effort, and during the war-gaming process, the TF FSO should be able to determine who priority of fires goes to for planning.

A final point about mortars—it's a good idea to put a cap on the number of rounds they can fire without notifying the TF tactical operations center (TOC). This cap should not exceed a specified percentage of the basic load, which will prevent the platoon from firing all the ammunition without the TF commander, S3 or FSO's knowledge.

The other element in the TF that should get initial priority of fires is the security force, which is normally built around the scout platoon. Receiving calls-for-fire from the scouts and tying them into a fire plan can be a tough nut to crack. A good technique is to coordinate with the TF S2 to relay calls-for-fire from the scouts (over the battalion operations and intelligence net or whatever net the S2 is talking to the scouts on) and pass them to the fire support element (FSE) at the TOC (difficult when the TOC is moving). Calls-for-fire also can come over the TF command net.

Another good technique is to attach a COLT or FIST from one of the company/teams (minus the company FSO) to act as a conduit for fire missions. This meets the criteria for "effective positioning" and gives the scouts their own FSCOORD.

The bottom line is the TF FSO must adopt the method that works best for his TF. The ideal situation is observed, adjusted fire from the scouts, and they should be trained to adjust indirect fire (which means all they need is access to the fires net). This procedure is hard to do over the TF command net in the middle of a battle.

The security force, by doctrine, brings indirect fires upon the enemy on contact. Because the security force operates two to six kilometers in front of the TF, this could prevent the mortars from supporting them. During the war-gaming process, the FSO and commander must answer the following question. Does fire support (artillery) fire at combat reconnaissance

patrols or forward patrols at the risk of diluting its effect on the follow-on company-sized elements? Hitting a moving target with artillery is difficult at best; setting up the engagement and waiting for the forward security element to appear on the battlefield and then massing fires is probably more reasonable.

A technique to manage this is to set up an engagement criteria that establishes a minimum number of vehicles that aren't high-payoff targets the DS battalion can engage. The brigade establishes a cutoff for the number of vehicles as part of the staff planning process. However, the scouts' primary means of survival is to evade detection, and the FSO should accept calls-for-fire to allow the scouts to break contact and survive, regardless of target description.

Finally, more often than not, the brigade won't engage reconnaissance vehicles in a movement-to-contact, but that's not a "hard and fast" rule. Some movement-to-contact missions will dictate all reconnaissance vehicles be destroyed to ensure the success of the brigade.

Use quick-fire nets to increase responsiveness. Using quick-fire or exclusive nets, as outlined in FM 6-20-40, is a valid, viable technique for increasing the responsiveness of fire support assets. Having one or two of the lead FISTs (such as the advance guard company FIST of the lead TF) on the brigade fire support coordination net eliminates relays and provides the FSCOORD real-time information. This could be standing operating procedure (SOP) for a brigade movement-to-contact, but it needs to be rehearsed during the fire support rehearsal.

Use smoke as a combat multiplier. The FSO must remember to plan for smoke. FM 6-20-40 addresses the possible uses of smoke during a movement-to-contact. The brigade FSO should have allocated a certain amount of smoke to the TF for planning purposes. During the war-gaming process, the TF FSO should identify the events that call for the smoke and plan accordingly. Smoke is ideal for supporting the deception effort.

Rehearsals and Refinement

The TF maneuver rehearsal should focus on actions upon contact. The TF FSO should use this time to ensure his shooters are aware of their responsibilities and fire

support is synchronized with the other battlefield operating systems.

The fire support rehearsal also should focus on actions on contact and what redundancies are available. For example, backup observers are identified by name and position and, as a minimum, make radio checks with the mortar and DS battalion FDCs. The advance guard FIST should be able to explain the concept for employing the mortar platoon.

Refinement of targets may be limited due to the vagueness of the enemy situation. So the FSO should resist the temptation to plan targets to support every maneuver contingency. He should stick to a generic scheme of fires that is event-driven. In that case, the TF FSO will have to change very little, assuming the enemy has merely moved closer to the TF zone.

Movement-to-Contact Execution

The FSO must assume that part of the intent for fires is to mass on company-sized elements and ignore platoon-sized and smaller elements unless they are high-payoff targets. This means the TF FSO and FSE are concerned with where the forward security element and advance guard's main body are. The TF S2 uses an event template to predict locations of threat elements on the battlefield at any given time. (The S2 is "paid" to analyze and predict this type of information.)

The TF FSO must understand the time-space relationships between the reconnaissance patrols, the forward security element and the rest of the formation. Knowing this, he can make intelligent decisions that allow fire support to influence the battle. For example, in Figure 3, the doctrinal distance between the first combat reconnaissance patrols (CRPs) and the forward security element is up to 10 kilometers. Given a rate of advance of 30 kilometers per hour—based on mission, enemy, terrain, troops and time available (METT-T) from the threat perspective—this means the forward security element doctrinally will appear 20 minutes after the sighting of the first reconnaissance patrols. The five- to 10-kilometer distance between the forward security element and the advance guard's main body also provides a reference point for when they'll appear on the battlefield.

What does the TF FSO do with this information? Ideally, there will be a covering force (reporting to the division or

higher) in front of the brigade advance guard. Spot reports and intelligence summaries will provide the brigade S2 a *picture in time* as to threat dispositions and strengths. Spot reports will confirm sightings of BMPs, and the S2 will be able to predict they're the CRPs from the advance guard battalion. This *key read* literally sets the clock ticking as to when the forward security element will arrive on the battlefield.

The TF security force will be oriented to pick up and track the enemy reconnaissance elements as they enter the brigade zone. The TF commander probably will maneuver the advance guard to destroy the CRPs and take up a position to fix the forward security element so the main body of the TF can maneuver.

This is the window of time for the TF FSO to get his fire support "ducks in a row." He uses this time to get shooters in position and sets into action the generic sequence of events decided on during war-gaming and the fire support rehearsal. The TF FSO, in conjunction with the TF commander, selects the indirect-fire EA and relays this information to his subordinate FIST and the DS battalion. The DS battalion prepares to mass fires on the new priority target. The company FSO (and backup shooters and COLT team, if applicable) responsible for the engagement gets into position to see the trigger point, verifies communications with the firing elements and synchronizes the fight at the company level. The advance guard FIST ensures the mortar platoon is prepared to deliver fire. The reserve FIST attached to the scouts reports to the FSCOORD or FSO when the TF security force picks up the forward security element and continuously maintains eyes on the formation until the TF engages it.

This same thought process is used when the TF fights the advance guard's main body. The intent for fires drives the fire support actions on contact, regardless of where contact occurs. Ideally, the TF FSO is nothing more than a facilitator during the battle to ensure the intent for fires is met.

This approach of using intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) products combined with a good intent for fires adds structure to the battlefield and reduces the variables the TF FSO must contend with.



Fire supporters in the FSE, 2d Bde, 3d ID, plan for an upcoming operation at the CMTC.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the TF FSO and his role in planning, preparing and executing a fire plan to support a movement-to-contact. In the interest of brevity, I didn't discuss in detail the roles of all the key players involved in this type of operation, such as the brigade FSO and the DS battalion S3. Army Aviation and close air support (CAS) also were omitted.

All of the techniques in this article are just that—techniques. Every movement-to-contact is unique, and the fire plan to support it must be tailored to METT-T. By applying sound doctrinal techniques and having a thorough understanding of the threat, the TF FSO can significantly increase his battalion's chances of success on the battlefield.



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